THE PROBLEMATIZATION OF WOMAN-AS-WRITER:

A STUDY OF SELECT NOVELS OF SHASHI DESHPANDE AND MARGARET LAURENCE

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SYNOPSIS

Writing is a gendered activity**:** it bears the insignia of the writer's 'gender' and its appraisal is also gender-centric. Many a woman writer has been shrouded in silence due to literary misogyny. To avert social censure some of the early women writers adopted a male pseudonym and a male narrative voice. Writing is regarded as a male prerogative. It is wielded as a powerful tool in preserving patriarchy. Hence women are denied access to writing, and many an Eve who has attempted to pluck the forbidden fruit of writing leads an accursed life.

The blight cast by the frosty patriarchal atmosphere on the burgeoning of female creativity and the struggle of women writers for their blossoming have become matters of serious concern for feminists. The exclusion, marginalization and trivialization women writers have to endure are voiced in many articles, interviews and fiction. With the emergence of Feminism in the twentieth century the number of

women writers rose steeply and steadily, effecting a sea change in the literary scenario. Using their captors' double-edged weapon – language with its defensive and subversive properties –women writers forge ahead, and give visibility and validity to their existence.

A woman writer problematizes her relationship to art in her writing. In other words, the conflicts a woman-as writer faces in relation to her art are consequent upon the conflicts she faces in her personal life as a woman. To be precise, the hindrances to the 'becoming' of a woman are but the hindrances to her 'being' as well.

The study entitled **"The Problematization of Woman-as-Writer: A Study of Select Novels of Shashi Deshpande and Margaret Laurence"** attempts to examine how Shashi Deshpande and Margaret Laurence problematize their relationship to art. The study primarily focuses on the presentation of the writer-characters in the select novels of these writers.

Since the last quarter of the twentieth century Shashi Deshpande has become an undeniable presence among Indian English writers. Starting her career with children's stories and short stories she majored into novels of serious import with *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. Other novels credited to her name are *If I Die Today*, *Come Up and Be Dead*, *Roots and Shadows*, *That Long Silence*, *The Binding Vine*, *A Matter of Time*, *Small Remedies*, *Moving On* and *In the Country of Deceit*. In six of these novels she depicts a writer-character. Through these writer characters she presents the

problematized relationship of an artist to her art. Her middle-aged writer-characters realise that deconstruction of the 'woman' is crucial to the removal of the impasse in their career.

Winner of several awards and honours, the Canadian writer, Margaret Laurence has to her credit several collections of short stories, essays, memoirs and novels. This writer from the small prairie town Neepawa of Manitoba province creates a similar place called Manawaka for her five-series novel — *The Stone Angel* (1964), *A Jest of God* (1966), *The Fire-Dwellers* (1969), *A Bird in the House* (1970) and *The Diviners* (1974). Apart from influencing a whole generation of writers, Laurence has given women a distinctive voice. She has created a strong breed of women characters that possess a keen sense of self or battle hard to find it. Morag Gunn, the writer protagonist of *The Diviners* redeems her creative powers from the stranglehold of marital ties. She snaps off her relationship with Brooke Skelton, the University Professor and forgoes the much-desired-dignified social status it entails.

Stifling of female creativity is apparently not only a means but an end in itself. So women fight those forces that curb creativity and thwart self-actualization. As a corollary, the topic of women's problematized relationship to art often interposes in their writing.

This study on Deshpande and Laurence brings to fore the conspicuous connection between the constraints on self-actualisation and women writers'

restrained personal life. An examination of the patriarchal tentacles stretching out to strangle their creative powers exposes the politics of creativity operative in the phallocratic world. By reclaiming their sexed bodies from which they have been alienated they (w)rite back at the phallologos. The writer-characters mirror the life and crisis of the authors as they voyage in search of selfhood. The portrayal of women writers as characters becomes an appropriate medium for female authors to encode their troubled relationship to art.

Insights from feminist literary theories expounded by Elaine Showalter, Virginia Woolf, Hélène Cixous and others are selectively used in this analytical study. This study on Shashi Deshpande and Margaret Laurence addresses certain questions which are of crucial importance to female creativity.

The thesis is presented in five chapters. The **introductory chapter** explores the various milestones in women's writing before it came of age. Written from a historical perspective this chapter begins with a reference to the early women writers who had to don a male disguise to sneak into the exclusive male territory of writing.

Female anatomy has been skilfully wielded to prevent women from transcending the domestic roles. The realisation that 'femininity' is seductive — letting the values of the oppressive system reside in women's minds, breeding low self-esteem and infusing humiliation of sexual objectification — accounts for the troubled relationship between the female artist and her creativity.

With the surge of feminism the concept of ‘gender’ got exploded. Women writers of this period regarded it their duty to raise consciousness: that gender can be deconstructed. They also questioned the binary slotting of women.

It is also apparent that women have explored and exploited the genre ‘novel’ and all its variant forms such as realistic novels, gothic novels, fantasy, science fiction, utopian novels, etc., as a part of the quest for ‘something new’. They expanded the frontiers of the novel to include the whole gamut of women’s experience: the small trivia of their daily life, human relationships of all kinds, female bodily functions, etc.

This chapter also introduces and places the authors selected for study within their respective traditions. Laurence and Deshpande are divided by temporal, spatial, cultural factors. However, feminism beats as a slow and steady pulse throughout their works. Both are concerned with the lives of women, their liberty and freedom, their space for growth and expression. While Deshpande’s heroines succeed to rehabilitate themselves within the fold of the family set up, Laurence’s break out of the conventional set up.

The **second chapter** entitled **“Politics of Creativity”** poses the problems women writers have to grapple with. Women’s writing encounters exclusion, marginalization and trivialization in the phallocentric world. Denied access to the main(male)stream literature, women writers fight back to create ‘a space of their

own'. The writer-characters of Deshpande and Laurence encounter various impediments in exercising their creative talents. This chapter looks into those aspects of phallocentrism that suppress female creativity.

The term 'woman writer' implies that the 'gender' of the writer is foregrounded. It goes without saying that when the tag 'woman' is attached to something it gets down-sized and assumes a pejorative connotation. This means that 'sexual politics' comes to the fore when women writers stake out a claim in the world of letters. The patriarchal intervention hampers the free expression of Deshpande and Laurence's writer-characters.

A study of Mira, the budding poet in *The Binding Vine* is a prime example for the politics of creativity. Exclusion from the world of letters is perhaps, the most serious injustice women had to set aright. Women are pinned down as inferior creations on the ground that they are primarily 'two legged-wombs'.

The stamp of triviality is slammed on women's writing. This explicates the exclusion of women's works from canonical literature. Jaya in *That Long Silence* and Indu in *Roots and Shadows* have the experience of being cold shouldered by man-oriented publishing world. Brooke Skelton often greets Morag, despite her dislike, 'my little one', 'my child' and criticises her writing as sentimental.

Family evidently stands foremost among the regimes of censorship on women's writing. In *That Long Silence* Mohan wants his wife Jaya to guard the

honour of the family, and maintain the divide between the public and the private. Consequently she refrains herself from writing on man-woman relationship. In *The Diviners* Morag suffers role conflict. Her husband expects that she will always prioritise wifely duties over her career.

The **third chapter** entitled **"Writing the Body"** examines the female body as a site of power as well as resistance. The selfhood and self-expression that women writers seek through their writing can be attained only by writing the body. The fundamental unique experience of the female is her experience of her sexuality, her bodily functions and capacities.

Women are the possession of man: sex, sexuality and fertility are all male prerogative. In essence, male control of women's bodies is the cornerstone of patriarchy. Reclamation of the female body, therefore, is inevitable.

It is apparent that the social construction of women's bodies is a political process. The ideals of modesty and chastity are imposed on women to pinion them down to subservient roles of wifehood. The modern woman in quest of self-identity 'outsteps' the boundaries set for her by flouting the rules of chastity, and demystifying marriage and motherhood.

Through their representational characters Deshpande and Laurence reclaim female subjecthood, and register their resistance by 'writing the female body' from which women are alienated. They challenge the cultural story about female sexuality

by describing the conflict women experience between the feelings of their bodies and the cultural taboos on their desires.

When Laurence's heroine, Morag realises that the procreative rights of women appertain to the male domain, she does not hesitate to wrest her rights over her body. Thus having a child, like her writing, is an act she undertakes on her own, without Skelton's help or his approval.

Rape is unquestionably a gendered crime, perhaps, the most atrocious cruelty inflicted on a woman. Deshpande's novel *The Binding Vine* deals with rape and its ramifications inside and outside the fold of marriage. In the case of marital rape it is deemed that the husband is only exercising his authorial power, received through the transfer of the rights of possession. Rape outside the fold of marriage is treated as a sort of property damage. Deshpande opines that for women to 'speak' of rape is itself a measure of liberation. There is a shift in woman's position: from serving as the object of voyeuristic discourse to the occupation of a subject-position, 'master' of narrative.

The **fourth chapter** entitled **"Writing the Self"** examines how women writers encode their problematized relationship to art through the writer-characters they have created. The plot of each novel taken for study revolves around a writer-character in conflict with her 'self' and society. The life of the writer-character bears some resemblance – metaphorical, biological, or autobiographical – to the life of the writer

of each novel. Thus the fiction charts the intertwined course of the writer's life and art.

Interviews, self-authored articles, memoirs, etc., reveal an identical journey of growth, crisis and self-realisation of the writer-characters and the authors. The author's handling of the troubled phase in the protagonist's life is an important index of her own feminist awareness. The stages of self-crisis, self-exploration, self-discovery, and self-actualisation that Deshpande passes through in her career as a writer can be traced in the lives of Indu, Jaya, Mira, Sumi, Madhu, Vasu and Jiji as they regain their 'face' and 'voice' from the state of 'anonymity'. Undoubtedly, Laurence and her writer-character Morag Gunn converge on many points, and she admits that *The Diviners* is her spiritual autobiography.

Thus the writer-protagonist becomes a mirror for the author, to examine, realise and revalidate herself. Thus, through these seemingly autobiographical novels Deshpande and Laurence discuss the various aspects of marginalisation and exclusion women writers face.

The **concluding chapter** sums up the major arguments. It wraps up with a note that the topic of the research remains pertinent as women writers continue to be despised and disparaged by male denigrators.